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A Case for Changing School District Organization

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A CASE FOR CHANGING SCHOOL DISTRICT ORGANIZATION

During my first year as State Superintendent of Public Instruction, I asked myself and my staff to determine what goals should be set for the State Superintendent's office--goals and priorities that would give solid evidence of educational leadership at the state level; goals that, when pursued and achieved, would assist in providing quality education; goals that would ensure all Montana youth equal educational opportunity; and goals that would provide our young people the maximum opportunity to develop their individual talents and skills. We set ourselves twelve goals--or priorities--all of which are important and on which we will all be working; but one seemed most urgent because, in effect, it underlies many of the others.

SCHOOL DISTRICT ORGANIZATION IS ONE OF THE SINGULARLY MOST IMPORTANT CONCERNS CONFRONTING MONTANA EDUCATION TODAY.

School district organization is one of the singularly most important concerns confronting Montana education today.

School district organization--or "reorganization"--may be described as an effort to obtain a better school district administrative organization and structure for the state of Montana. It is not an attempt to close the doors of *needed* small or rural schools in the state. The closure of schools is and should remain the prerogative of the people and boards of trustees of the school

districts themselves. Decisions on the operation of schools must continue to be made by the people in their respective communities on the basis of local needs, interests, availability of personnel and services, and public convenience. Thus, when I speak of school district organization, I refer to districts and not to schools.

ONE OUT OF EVERY 25 OF THE NATION'S SCHOOL DISTRICTS IS IN MONTANA.

But a long cold look at the administrative side of Montana education is needed; for our present-day antiquated, outmoded, inefficient, uneconomic and cumbersome school district structure has a direct and significant impact on the quality of education that our schools are able to provide.

On this issue, we must ask ourselves two questions. First, "Are the students in our communities obtaining the quality education they deserve and we can provide?" Second, "Is our district school system organized to provide this education in an economic and efficient manner?"

If the response to these questions is in the negative, then I submit that an important challenge faces us all: the challenge to do something about it. School boards and administrators and community citizens will have to live up to their obligations and responsibilities to become agents for needed change in their school district's organization.

This is not to say that reorganization and change have not been going on. Little more than 20 years ago, in 1947-48, Montana had 1,499 school districts and 139,784 school census children. On October 1, 1969, Montana had 780

existent school districts to accommodate an estimated 229,000 school census children. As of May 1, 1970, Montana had 701 operating school districts. This means that, in the last 20 years, Montana has made substantial progress in reducing the number of school districts. In recent years, the reduction has averaged 35 school districts per year.

The day of the "one student school district" has apparently passed into history. But only five years ago there were 20 school districts listed in the *Montana Education Directory* with enrollments of one student each.

Despite this progress in reducing the number of school districts, the state has some distance to go before reaching an ideal situation. Consider these facts. Approximately one out of every 260 of the nation's school population is in Montana. Yet, one out of every 25 of the nation's school districts is in Montana. If one looked at these statistics in another way, one could say that in 1968 Montana had about double the number of school districts compared with the national average.

ARE THE STUDENTS IN YOUR COMMUNITY OBTAINING THE QUALITY EDUCATION THEY DESERVE?

Certainly, there was a time when the small school district performed a very necessary and vital function in education for Montana. The state's population was small. Travel was extremely limited and only possible by wagon or train. There were few subjects in the school curriculum--only the three R's. The tools of learning consisted of slates, pencils and chalk. Few students expected to receive much more than an elementary school education.

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But this is no longer the 19th century. This is the space age--an age of technology and scientific advancement--when expectations for what schools can do have risen enormously. This is an age of communication; with good roads and school buses, few areas of the state are truly isolated. This is an age in which the school is expected to offer a diversity of programs, a multiplicity of services and a variety of learning experiences to meet the individual needs of students living in a complex, fast-moving technological society. Today, many of our students pursue post-secondary education in an institution of higher learning or take training at a vo-tech center or similar institution. To meet the needs of all students, classrooms need to offer a variety of instructional methods; and audio-visual and other sophisticated equipment must become part and parcel of the teaching routine.

There are, then, a number of compelling reasons why school administrators, boards of trustees, teachers and citizens generally ought to take a good, hard look at present school district organization in Montana.

Perhaps the most important reason to take stock is the fact that the small school with few pupils enrolled and with one or two teachers employed simply cannot provide the range of educational services essential to a modern school program. The blunt fact is that it is just not possible under existing conditions for all of Montana's youth to avail themselves of equal educational opportunities. In truth, perhaps present school district organization is a hindrance to equal educational opportunity.

School districts still exist in which conditions are outmoded, where the one-room, one-teacher

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school with three or four students enrolled possesses little modern equipment beyond a 150-watt light bulb. This situation points up a second reason--antiquity. Some of these school districts provide little more than minimum educational programs required for accreditation if, indeed, they are able to meet even minimum standards.

A third reason concerns economy. There are many school districts which are no longer economically feasible. One could not quarrel with taxpayers prepared to tolerate a costly situation *if* their district were able to provide a quality of education commensurate with existing needs. In many of these districts, however, there is neither quality nor economy. In some cases, even though a reasonable quality of education is provided, taxpayers are paying exorbitant costs. As we all know, school expenditures have increased tremendously in the past 20 years, climbing from an average per-pupil expenditure statewide of $270 in 1947-48 to $768 in 1967-68. For many of our rural schools, the average per-pupil costs now range from 3 to 6 times the statewide average or as much as $4,500 per pupil. This high cost is not always necessary; where school administrators are also able to concentrate students in school districts of reasonable size, per-pupil costs frequently drop below the state average with an accompanying better-than-average educational program being provided.

THIS IS NO LONGER THE 19TH CENTURY.

A further reason for us to assess Montana's

school district organization concerns efficiency. Many of the smaller school districts cannot perform efficiently the quality services that are required or desired. A typical example is a school district that has need for a half-time professional person. In many of our rural areas, such professionals are just not available; so the district employs an unqualified person or does without. Frequently, too, the smaller school districts are not able to obtain needed supplies and purchases as cheaply as may be available to districts which purchase in bulk quantities.

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We must also face the fact that many of our well-trained teachers are reluctant to teach in the smaller districts when they have access to modern, well-equipped facilities that are available in many larger school districts in the state. The closure of many rural schools in the state has resulted simply from the lack of teachers.

More reasons could be cited for the need to examine school district organization in addition to the need for a wider range of services and the need for economy, efficiency and modernization.

Another area to be explored in conjunction with district organization is the concept of shared services and cooperative programs. With the advent of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, many of our smaller school districts were compelled by federal law to engage in cooperative programs in order to take advantage of their respective allocations. It is, therefore, not uncommon today to find 15 or 20 Montana school districts participating together in a Title I project.

Through the cooperative project approach, many of these districts have employed specialist personnel that individually they could not have afforded. The employment of a full-time health nurse for a half-dozen small districts in Western Montana is a good example. Each of the districts involved had enrollments of less than 100 students each. In school district organization, I think it is necessary to consider such possibilities as cooperative programs, shared services and the formation of intermediate units.

Another reason for us to consider the question of school district organization relates to public expectations. More is expected of our schools and our educational leaders today than was the case 20 to 50 years ago. People generally are very much aware of the need for improved educational products of our schools. When a school fails to turn out students who can compete in our labor and professional markets for the available jobs and positions, some embarrassing questions are bound to be asked of that school's officials. Schools which cannot compete are finding it increasingly difficult to justify and to defend their educational programs. In many cases, there can be little defense and no justification. Parents and citizens have every reason to expect that our young people have equal opportunities for quality education. I emphasize both the words *equal* and *quality.* School districts not meeting these prerequisites are living on borrowed time.

FOR TOO MANY OF OUR RURAL SCHOOLS, THE AVERAGE PER-PUPIL COSTS NOW RANGE 3 TO 6 TIMES THE STATEWIDE AVERAGE.

Another facet of school district reorganization is unification. Last spring, only 12 "separate" county high school districts remained in Montana. On July 1, 1970, three of these districts unified with elementary districts. Ap-

parently public interest in unification exists in six of the remaining nine districts. Very possibly, by July 1, 1971, most of the county high school districts remaining as of July 1, 1970, will have unified--a step in the right direction.

For the reasons I have noted, I believe the state's educational leaders and all citizens must make a sober appraisal of the Montana school district as it presently exists. What the district *does not* or *cannot* provide in essential services has to be considered along with those services it does offer. Each district must be evaluated on the basis of how well it serves our youth in a changing world.

The Great Plains School District Organization Project stated the issue this way:

> The problem is not in being too small or too big. The problem is to be found in what we do with our smallness and with our bigness; and in what the resultant cost is, both to the taxpayers in the returns for the invested dollar and to the youth of the community in terms of educational opportunities or deprivations of such opportunities. [1]

Certainly the question of school district organization can no longer be ignored. It would be folly to do so.

If we are to provide equal opportunity and quality education for all Montana students--now and in the future--then every possible means of achieving this goal must be explored. A better organization of Montana's school districts is one such means.

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[1] *Great Plains School District Organization Project* (newsletter), Vol. 2, No. 4, June 1968, p. 3.